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An Old Guide to a Complicated Relationship: Sino-American Relations through the Lens of John King Fairbank

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John King Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 630 pp.

At the summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) in October 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush and Chinese President Jiang Zemin developed an obvious rapport and agreed to work closely together to combat terrorism. This trans-Pacific warmth may not have seemed remarkable to some observers, given the breadth of the international consensus against terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11th incident, yet the meeting took place just six months after the Hainan spy-plane incident. The latter, a conflict over an American electronics eavesdropping aircraft that collided with a Chinese fighter and landed on Hainan Island, was one of the most serious bilateral crises of the postwar era and an event that briefly appeared to presage a prolonged Sino-American deep freeze. Yet this juxtaposition of genuine warmth and hostile chill is far from unusual in U.S.-China relations, and in fact characterizes the ties throughout the postwar era. In a little over a decade before the Hainan Incident, the freezing-thawing cycle repeated at least three times, centering on the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996, and the Kosovo/Chinese Embassy Bombing Crisis of 1999. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre, China was cut off from most high-level contacts with Western countries for an extended period. The Taiwan Strait Crisis was the most dangerous Sino-American conflict since the crises over Quemoy and Matsu in the 1950s, and the Kosovo Crisis led to the stoning of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing by an angry mob.

The tendency toward periodic crisis between the world's only superpower and the major military power of East Asia means that Sino-American relations

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can never be taken for granted. No longer under pressure to cooperate against the larger Soviet threat, the erstwhile Cold War friends find that more careful management of the relationship is now called for, but differing perceptions of each other—and of the relationship—make the ongoing process of adjustment complicated. For the Chinese, it is not a cliché to call the first decade of the 21st century a time of transition—politically to a new generation, economically to a more fully capitalist market system, socially to a more pluralistic community. As China changes, nationalistic feelings and desire for international respect and power are growing. Americans, as ever, cannot seem to decide if China is a friend or a threat. Among academics and policymakers, a debate over the nature of Chinese foreign policy has raged since Tiananmen, centered on the question of whether China is a stealthily aggressive or determinedly conservative status quo power. Among the more notable contributions to the China foreign policy discourse, Bernstein and Munro insist on the former, while Nathan and Ross argue for the latter.[1]

This debate has been obscured by the recent U.S. preoccupation with the "War on Terrorism" and possible conflicts with Iraq and North Korea, but will likely resurface when those issues have faded. In anticipation of the next round of the debate, it might be useful to consider classic literature that may yield insights for either scholars or the public. Among the best China scholars was John King Fairbank, a towering figure in postwar American study of Chinese history. As professor of history at Harvard University until 1977, he trained many leading historians of East Asia, such as Akira Iriye. His *China: A New History*, completed just before his death in 1991, is one of the most comprehensive and accessible summaries of modern research on Chinese history.[2] Several of his other books on Chinese history remain in circulation.

The United States and China became a standard text, not just on American foreign policy toward China, but on Chinese history and society in general. His first book, it went through five editions, each uncannily tracking critical moments in recent Chinese-American history. The first edition went to press in 1948, as the final battle between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) and Mao Zedong's Communists was raging across north China, while the second appeared in 1958, at the beginning of Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward. A third reached the shelves in 1971, just as U.S. President Nixon was arranging his momentous trip to China, and a fourth was issued in 1979, right after Deng Xiaoping launched his reform program—and immediately following establishment of formal diplomatic ties between the two countries. An expanded fourth edition came off the press in 1983, as the first phase of Deng's reforms, that is, agricultural and industrial restructuring, was in high gear. That was about the time that the previously hostile Reagan administration had decided to play the "China card" as it reheated the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Had Fairbank lived beyond 1991, perhaps there would have been a sixth edition addressing the Democracy Movement, the Tienanmen massacre, the advent of Jiang Zemin, and the cooling of Sino-American ties with the end of the Cold War.

In each edition, Fairbank set for himself an ambitious task: to explain the nature of traditional Chinese society, its response to Western encroachment, and the development of the nationalist struggle leading up to the death struggle of the late 1940s, as well as to consider American policy options in China. Amazingly, each version succeeds, though the message has changed from edition to edition. The first tells Americans there is little either they or the Soviets can do to influence the outcome of the Chinese civil war since it entirely a Chinese matter being decided between two sets of authoritarian Chinese nationalists. It is easy to see now that Fairbank was essentially correct, but America was not paying attention. President Truman cut Chiang adrift in 1948, but only because the Kuomintang seemed a losing proposition. With the "fall" of China and the subsequent Chinese intervention in the Korean War, the right wing of the Republican party crucified the Truman administration and made sure the U.S. did not even talk to the Chinese government for twenty years. The second edition assesses the early progress of Communism in China, focusing on the heady reform period of the early 1950s. The third examines the possibility of relations in light of America's debacle in Vietnam, which Fairbank called "the final end of the era of gunboat diplomacy" (p. x, 1971 ed.). The fourth considers the developing Sino-American ties, and emphasizes that China has followed its own path since 1949, avoiding domination by either the U.S. or the Soviet Union.

Each of the editions kept its fundamental focus on the essential nature of Chinese history and society. Actually, the title is somewhat misleading, since it derives from Harvard's American Foreign Policy Library Series, in which all titles are *The United States and. . .* The book's purpose, Fairbank insists, is "to summarize the major patterns of thought and conduct, the major political and economic forms, which China's long past has ingrained in Chinese society" (p. 4, 1948 ed.), and to relate this to recent Chinese development. China has developed through 4,000 years such a unique way of life and a degree of inertia that both domination from the outside or change from within are made difficult. Even so, the influx of foreign technology and customs that washed over China since the mid-19th century created major adjustment problems. This could be glimpsed in trivial details, such as hybrid wardrobes of Western pants and shoes with Chinese gowns, or the use of the Chinese characters for "metal" and "grapefruit" for uranium because the latter sounds like the letter "u." It could also be seen in the destruction of the cottage textile industry and a demographic explosion.

Unlike the rapidly urbanizing nations of the West, says Fairbank, China has always been almost entirely a rural country. Its Western-influenced coastal cities are an insignificant segment of the country. At its core, Chinese society is authoritarian. The average Chinese was and is a peasant whose life is determined by familialism, cooperation with other villagers, and respect for his superiors. Western notions of individualism, free enterprise, and profits are thus alien to Chinese tradition. The Chinese place gratuities ahead of profits, operate by per-

sonal favors instead of individual initiative or innovation, and value rote memorization of "classics" (be they Confucian or Communist) over original thought. Some form of socialism, suggests Fairbank, would therefore be a more pertinent adaptation of Western thought than capitalism.

Into an environment shaped by the heavy hand of tradition came the Western invasion of the 19th century, which produced in succession peasant revolts, reform movements, and nationalism. This nationalism, insists Fairbank, is the central fact of 20th-century Chinese history. Chinese nationalism was above all a reaction to the Western encroachment, and any outsider wishing to influence China had to respect the desire of the Chinese to control their own destiny. Thus, all 20th-century Chinese political phenomena came to be evaluated in terms of nationalism. The KMT failed as a movement because it could not secure its own nationalist aims, while the Communists were not popularly viewed as mere tools of Moscow because they pursued fundamentally Chinese nationalistic goals.

The 1948 edition is in part an indictment of the failures of U.S. China policy and a prescient analysis of the coming debate on American failure in China. Fairbank notes the "plain ignorance" in America about Chinese affairs. Then, he admonishes his readers not to engage in wishful thinking, subjective analysis, or sentimentality in looking at China. Next, he lists "seven deadly sins" of the U.S. approach to China: (1) fear of totalitarianism and uncertainty about the future nurtured mass hysteria; (2) refusal to recognize why the U.S. is falling behind in international power politics; (3) neglect of moral and ideological factors in social change; (4) refusal to consider foreign points of view; (5) being misled by weekly magazines that make no distinction between editorializing and propaganda; (6) accepting policies whose relevance to China is obscure; and (7) exaggerating the ability of the U.S. to affect a revolution involving 500 million people. "It is not within the power of the American people," insists Fairbank, "to bestow the Mandate of Heaven" (the Chinese tradition of the mantle of legitimacy coming to rest on the shoulders of a rebel who founds a new dynasty; pp. 331–34, 1948 ed.). The Communists are popular, he says, because they have picked up the support of many of the liberals and progressives disenchanted with KMT misrule, because they are organizationally independent from Moscow, and because they more effectively address the nationalist agenda. He concedes he does not know the extent of Soviet involvement with the Chinese Communists, but suggests it is not to be decisive. A sure way to push the Chinese Communists into the arms of Moscow is to try to prop up the dying KMT, and if the U.S. is smart it will support Chinese nationalism while pushing a liberal program. No nation, he concludes, can change China from the outside.

The second edition departs little from the first's account of Chinese tradition, except in noting more of the complexity. He tones down criticism of the KMT, extolling "our ally Taiwan" (p. 275, 1958 ed.), while pointing out the traditional authoritarian strains in Chinese Communist thinking. The third edition notes the moral anguish many scholars felt during the Vietnam era, and suggests Ameri-

can involvement in the conflict had much to do with avoidance of intervention in China in the late 1940s and the fact of intervention in Korea. It concludes with optimistic recommendations for mutual self-assessment as the means to overcome lack of ties. The fourth edition examines the reconstruction of the country's politics and economy after Mao.

A landmark work such as Fairbank's is difficult to criticize; it becomes part of the landscape. Yet, like any work struck off by a man, the book has strengths and weaknesses. The greatest strength of the 1948 edition, and all subsequent revisions, has been its combination of reflection on Chinese history and society with a Jeremiah-like cry against shortsighted American policy. What is more, Fairbank is knowledgeable enough to handle not only Chinese social and American diplomatic history, but Russian history as well. The book's second greatest strength is its summation of general scholarship on China, with heavy use of current monographs by China specialists. While Fairbank uses footnotes only sparingly, he provides one of the simplest, clearest narratives available on Chinese history. Despite his obvious concerns, he maintains a remarkable degree of objectivity and balance in presenting the material. He arranges his subjects in a quite accessible topical format, for example, the nature of Chinese society, the Confucian patterns, alien rule and dynastic struggle, political traditions, the Western impact, and the revolutionary process. Also, he presents a comprehensive bibliographic essay on those topics.

Furthermore, the several editions of Fairbank's book testify to a scholar's humility. With the first edition he takes a great risk writing a major book on China at a time when events there were so fluid, and admits that he cannot see the final outcome of the Chinese revolution. Few observers, in fact, could predict the swift collapse of the KMT over the next eighteen months. The third edition notes how the terrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution have destroyed much of the sense of social progress that he writes about in the second. In 1979, he could admit that even he was surprised at China's ability to follow a path independent of both superpowers.

Also, Fairbank's indictment of American foreign policy is applicable far beyond the postwar fiasco in China. Support for a corrupt regime and an ineffective nationalist movement because it is perceived to be the only alternative to Communism merely began in China, and has been played out on a dozen stages throughout the Third World. The U.S. debacle in Vietnam provides ample illustration for a number of his other indictments, such as neglect of the ideological and moral dimensions of the conflict, the belief that the U.S. could affect the course of a distant rebellion, and refusal to listen to foreign points of view. Perhaps his most foresighted indictment, though, concerns the news media. As it did in covering China, American news organizations would throughout the postwar era present their support for basic foreign policy as objective reporting, which radical critics such as Noam Chomsky label the manufacturing of consent.

Of course, the balanced, scholarly approach Fairbank employs makes his

work less immediate, colorful, and compelling—and a less important contribution to the political debate over "the China question." Though widely read by academics, it is doubtful many important American foreign policy makers since the rapprochement of the 1970s have read Fairbank, aside from erstwhile academics such as Henry Kissinger or Winston Lord. Of course, Fairbank has not been without friends or influence in the establishment, and has been alternately a target of McCarthyism and a lionized figure. Unfortunately, books that have often most contributed to the political debate over China have been the anecdotal, journalistic, and trivial works churned out according to the shifting political winds of the last forty years. One wishes Fairbank had written a more popular book that distilled the wisdom of his *magnum opus*; it might have changed history.

Of course, one can argue with some of Fairbank's conclusions. Among the most obvious is his emphasis of the dichotomy between the exploited peasantry and the parasitic gentry of old China. Actually, as much as pre-industrial Europe, China possessed a complex, regionally diverse social structure. A middle class thrived throughout most of Chinese history, and there were several periods of marked economic and social progress, such as the Tang and Song Dynasties. To be sure, the socio-economic pattern was not the same as Europe, but up to the 19th century the latter was also a peasant-based society. If one looked at southern Europe at the beginning of the last century, for example, he would find traditional ways of doing things almost as pervasive as in China. Wherever one encounters a traditional agrarian society, one discovers similar organization of the political economy. The only real differences between China and southern Europe at that time were a bit more industrial dynamism and the absence of imperialist encroachment in southern Europe. Should one then write a book about southern Europe, describing it as some sort of exotic Other with entirely different assumptions about life? Perhaps in trying to take China on its own terms, Fairbank falls into the trap of viewing the country as a backwater. Moreover, in suggesting all modern Chinese history is a response to Westernization, Fairbank does not depart from conventional Western-centered histories of East Asia.

There are also a few surprising omissions in Fairbank's account of modern Chinese-American relations. For example, there is surprisingly scant mention of such American notables as General Joseph Stilwell, Patrick Hurley, John Foster Dulles, and Joseph McCarthy. There is virtually no reference to the anti-Japanese movement in China before 1937. There is little mention of the many key events in postwar Sino-American relations. Lack of coverage of the Korean War, essentially a war fought between China and the U.S., and the war-approaching Quemoy-Matsu crises of 1954 and 1958 are especially surprising. Fairbank also needs a somewhat fuller analysis of the Nixon-Kissinger rapprochement with China.

More on the economic relationship should have been included. In the early 1980s, bilateral trade volumes were still relatively small, so this was not a cen-

tral focus of the work. Today, China has become the workshop of the world, supplying light industrial export goods to consumer markets in the advanced industrial countries. China has an annual trade surplus of nearly $200 billion with the U.S. alone, and has amassed some of the largest foreign exchange reserves in the world. These developments presage a mighty global economic power. Much of the discussion about China's recent entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) suggested that it would open the Chinese market to the world. The more important effect may be exactly opposite. Recent China scholars are justifiably putting economics at the center of their work. These problems aside, Fairbank's work is deservedly a standard history of modern China.

Concentrating on the Sino-American relationship, the book might usefully have considered China's relations with other regional players. The Sino-Japanese, Sino-Indian, and Sino-Russian relationships are excellent comparative cases, and can shed light on China's world view and its concerns for history and security. The Sino-Japanese relationship in some ways mirrored the U.S.-China ties, with its sudden rapprochement in the 1970s, its shaping in the Cold War context, and its own warmth-freezing cycle. However, the outsized historical aspect of the relationship, focusing on Japan's alleged war crimes in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), is far less significant in U.S.-China ties. Most Americans missed the symbolic significance of Jiang's visit to Pearl Harbor in 1997; it was as much an anti-Japanese gesture as homage to America's fallen heroes. The Sino-Indian relationship has always been part geopolitical *realpolitik*, part cultural conflict, part rivalry of developmentalist regimes for leadership of the Third World, and part personal leadership conflict. China's ties with Russia have oscillated between mutual respect and ancient hostility.

We cannot know, if he was alive today, how Fairbank would feel about Sino-American relations. Given the moderate, continually updating approach he used, one can imagine perhaps two more editions reflecting on the changes in the relationship brought by the end of the Cold War, the Tiananmen Crisis, and post-Tiananmen retrenchment and consolidation under Jiang. He would undoubtedly discuss China's growing military capabilities, rising nationalism, and increasing multilateralism. He would be intrigued by China's entry into the WTO, its key role in APEC, and its recent attempt to forge a pan-Asian free trade area with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and South Korea. He would probably see Jiang and Premier Zhu Rongji as generally successful status quo leaders who regained China's international respectability in the wake of Tiananmen and who kept the process of economic reform moving ahead, but who fumbled a number of key political economic issues and showed a lack of vision regarding the future of the Chinese political system.

Where would he stand on the issue of China as an aggressive or defensive major power? I think he definitely would side with those who believe that China is not overly aggressive, and that America—and the world—have little to fear from China as a major power. He would point out that the Chinese have had gen-

erally cooperative ties with all of the major powers since the end of the Cold War, that China has increased its cooperation with international anti-proliferation regimes, that previously troubled relations with Russia, India, and Southeast Asia have markedly improved on all levels, and that China has made constructive contributions to peace and mutual security on the Korean Peninsula and in Central Asia. Finally, he would be impressed with the ability of Jiang and Bush, two stubborn national-interest leaders, to forge the most cooperative ties since the middle Reagan years.

Some recent China scholars, consciously or not, owe much to Fairbank. Three of the best recent works on Sino-American relations, by Mann, Tyler, and Lampton, carry forward the same kind of balanced criticism of both sides and attention to unfolding historical detail.[3] Mann and Tyler, as journalists, take a more anecdotal route than Fairbanks, but provide enough analysis along the way to provide excellent reads. Both books are somewhat limited by their focus on U.S. policymakers. Lampton provides a more balanced assessment of the differing "dreams" and realities of the two sides.

Mike Mansfield, the former U.S. ambassador to Japan, once described the Japanese-American relationship as the most important in the world, "bar none." Almost the same thing might be said about the Sino-American relationship, and that will certainly be true in the 21st century, as the great military power China replaces Japan as the economic center of East Asia. The warming-and-freezing cycle is likely to outlast the current cooperation on terrorism, especially as American hegemony declines and China's rise to great power status gains steam. Policymakers, scholars, and others seeking understanding of this complex transoceanic tie should not neglect one of the first to describe that relationship and the Chinese people in full: John King Fairbank.

Notes

[1] Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), and Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

[2] John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3] James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Vintage Books,1998); Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China, an Investigative History* (New York: A Century Foundation Book, 1999); David M. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).